

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
January 11, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Water, Spirit, Word,  
Genesis 1: 1-5, Acts 19: 1-7, Mark 1: 4-11

Last Sunday, as I sat amongst the congregation in worship, I rediscovered something that this Sunday's scriptures address. It was the overwhelming presence of God's Word and Spirit coming into me to calm me down so that I could really focus on worshipping the Lord. When I help lead worship, I do not really relax except when the anthems are played or sung. So Sunday's worship felt good, and I was able to really focus on Jan's excellent sermon and other aspects of worshipping God.

I had also just gotten back from a wonderful Christmas vacation where Holly and I celebrated forty years of marriage. I was feeling uptight in anticipation of all the church work ahead of me. I suspect that most of you understand what it is like to come back from Christmas vacation only to encounter the chaotic rush of activities of school or work. There are the unresolved issues that have lingered through the holidays, and new issues that demand immediate attention. There are projects or papers begging to get started, meetings or classes to prepare for and attend. Worst of all there is a brain that has been put on neutral during vacation and has grown accustomed to sleeping in that must be shocked awake and put into gear. Amidst the New Year's chaos, the brain is screaming that famous warning from the quintessentially classic 1960s American television series "Lost in Space" **'Danger, Will Robinson!'** So it is that we need God's Word and Spirit to come in and settle us down so we can focus on being Christian human beings, again. Our new elders and deacons may feel this stress as they anticipate becoming leaders of our congregation, a congregation in transition in a world that may seem to be out of control.

This is where God comes into our chaotic lives to help us and to speak to us as in our prayer of praise after the call to worship from Psalm 29 and the Old Testament Lesson from Genesis 1. "In both of these texts, water is mentioned and it represents the surging chaos out which God brings order, the stormy deeps over which Yahweh rules." Out of the formless void and darkness, the "ruah," the wind or Spirit of "God, swept like a" mighty gale "over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." Isn't this what we need in our lives when they seem out of control, not just at the beginning of the year but every day? We need God to speak his calming Word and move by his all powerful Spirit, like he did in the creation story, to sweep over the waters of our chaotic thoughts, our feelings of fear, our resultant angers and calm them down, remove the darkness of dread and fill us with the light of love and hope. We need God to rebalance the days and nights of our lives. "We desire with outstretched arms to receive the strength of God, and with all of our hearts to be blessed with God's peace!" (Psalm 29) We need God to whisper into the depths of our minds, "Be still and know that I am God." (Ps. 46), TNIBC Vol. 1, pg. 96

“When God spoke on that first day of creation, chaos immediately came to order. How can this be?” Remember what it was—or it is like in school: The teacher leaves the room for a moment. An orderly class very quickly turns into disorder. Talking erupts, paper planes take off, students spring from desks as if to a starter’s pistol. Then the teacher silently, unannounced and with arms crossed re-enters the room and he or she utters only one word, “Class.” The chaos immediately subsides and order is restored. On a much greater scale in the creation story, God said, “Let there be.” And there was—there is—the calming order and presence of God. We will need this Word and Spirit of God, as elders and deacons of First Presbyterian Church, to discern God’s will and lead our church through this time of transition. “Emphasis,” Jan./Feb. 2009.

Once God has calmed the chaos of our lives, like God calmed mine last Sunday, then God can really work with us and prepare us for the way ahead. Preparation was certainly what the Word of God, spoken through John the Baptist, was about in the Gospel of Mark. He was preparing the people of that day for the coming of the Lord, for the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah the Jews had been expecting for at least a thousand years. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ”

And so, the one who would prepare the way of the Lord, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Preparation is a vital part of becoming an elder or deacon. We hold an education day for new elders and deacons that includes prayer, the teaching of the Written Word of God, the Book of Confessions, the Book of Order and the job descriptions of what is expected. But before this, there must be the preparation John the Baptist said God wanted of us in anticipation of the coming of the Lord into our lives. This is true for all of us not just church officers. And what preparation is required of us? It involves repentance, forgiveness of sin, and baptism that open us up to conversion by God’s grace to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who then reforms our lives. We make sure that this preparation has been a part of any church officer’s life before we ask them to serve in the first place. John the Baptizer proclaimed we must be prepared.

Now some people in 27 AD were so enthralled with John and his teaching of preparation by water and the word that they thought he might be the Messiah, but he said, “No I am not he who is to come. I am nothing compared to him.” John the Baptist reminds me of a story about girl named Cindy. “Cindy was the team’s utility player. Whenever someone was hurt or couldn’t make a game, Cindy started. When the starting shortstop, Anisha, sprained her ankle, Cindy was ready. In fact, she played great. Over a two-week period that included several key tournaments, Cindy led the team in hitting, drove in key runs, and never committed one error in the field. When an out-of-state coach commended her for her play, Cindy quipped, ‘If you think that was something, wait until you see our first-string shortstop.’ John caused a stir with his preaching and baptizing. When people commended him on his work, like Cindy he

said, "If you think this is something, wait until you see the one coming after me!"

"Emphasis," Jan./Feb. 2009

The first stringer appeared alright and he had John baptize him as a part of his preparation for ministry. As he was being baptized with water the Holy Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove and as in the creation story the heavens were split and the voice of God spoke the Word, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And so Jesus, the long awaited Messiah was ordained and installed to the office of the Son of God and Savior of the world. He became the living Word of God. The first stringer appeared alright and was baptized by John. Jesus was prepared.

As a congregation, we have been going through another type of preparation thanks to the hard work of Jan Brooks. I believe that she has very clearly shown us the need for an associate pastor so that we can do more to spread the Word of God, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ, call more people of all ages to the repentance of sins, to baptism by water and the Spirit, and to a confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Now Jan was not clothed with camel's hair, or wore a leather belt around her waist, and did not normally eat locusts and wild honey. Maybe she does this on the rendezvous she attends. But she has called us to be prepared so that we may more effectively serve God's Son, the Beloved with whom God is well pleased. Thank you, Jan.

This Beloved Son of God, as John the Baptist proclaimed, brought a greater baptism than that of John, baptism by water and **the Holy Spirit**, the same Spirit of God that calmed the waters at creation and came upon Jesus in his baptism. It was this Holy Spirit that was missing amongst the disciples of John the Baptist Paul encountered in Ephesus as we heard about in the Epistle Lesson. They had been taught part of the message of John the Baptist by a disciple named Apollos. He taught them about repentance of sin and a baptism of water, and some about Jesus, but nothing about the baptism by the Holy Spirit. Paul took Apollos aside to educate him about the Good News and then assigned two Christian women, Priscilla and Aquila, to further train him. As for the other disciples of John the Baptist, "their faith was deficient at a critical point, not yet what it could or should be, and Paul's perceptive questioning of them became the means for growth." He asked them questions like "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" Paul did not berate them for their failures, nor did he chide them because they have apparently departed from their roots in John the Baptist. Like the teaching Pharisee he once was, and in the style of Jesus, Paul merely asked a relevant theological question, followed by another, and then by instruction. Their ignorance or regression into selling out to their culture was not an occasion for blame or even harsh confrontation, but for patient probing that leads to an empowerment for mission." [Texts For Preaching](#) Year B, pg. 262.

What we as church leaders and members must learn from this is that we must always be studying about our Christian faith and the Word of God. We are never done learning, and our deficiencies can lead others astray. We also learn from this that laying guilt trips on or blaming others for their spiritual deficiencies is not the way Paul or Jesus would teach others about the Christian faith, but coming up beside them where they are and helping them to see the truth of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit with patient questioning and careful listening to their answers can be very effective.

These men Paul so carefully taught were like a man in the following story. “A man was walking along the river when he spotted another man struggling against the current. The traveler stopped to watch the swimmer fight the muddy water until he emerged, panting, on the traveler’s shore. ‘Are you all right?’ the traveler asked. ‘Why were you in the river? Did you fall in?’ The swimmer shook his head. ‘No, no,’ he gasped. ‘I’m fine. This is how I always cross the river. My neighbor says this is the easiest place to cross.’ ‘That’s all very well,’ said the traveler, ‘but does your neighbor know there’s a bridge just a half mile that way?’”

“The disciples Paul encounters don’t realize that they’ve been missing out on the Holy Spirit — they don’t even know it exists! They don’t have anything to bridge the gap between themselves and the Father; instead, they’ve been needlessly fighting a mighty, muddy current to get there.” “Emphasis,” Jan./Feb. 2009

Once these men heard what Paul had to teach them, “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.” Their speaking in tongues was not the same as what happened at Pentecost, but it was the Spirit generating a profound and lively praise of God. Their prophesying was the preaching of the Word of God. What these men once lacked was now filled in. They were given the bridge, the Holy Spirit, to cross over to a greater relationship to God in Jesus Christ.

And so it is today, we who have been baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit where the Spirit comes upon us, and have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior must worship God with gusto, and be willing and well prepared to teach the Word of God so that others will also receive the Holy Spirit, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and know the overwhelming and calming presence of God in their chaos filled lives as they worship him with us.